



PRESS RELEASE
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CREW CONVICTED OF SMUGGLING COCAINE

TAMPA - United States Attorney Paul I. Perez announced today that a federal jury in Tampa found six defendants guilty of possession with intent to distribute cocaine and conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine, while aboard a vessel subject to United States jurisdiction. The convicted defendants are: Julian Castro Portocarrero, Carlos Martinez Ledesma, Luis Alberto Riascos Valencia, Jhon Caicedo Vallecilla, Juan Carlos Jaramillo Hoyos, and Celso Marino Nunez Mosquera.

The six defendants were convicted after a seven-day trial, which included testimony from crew members of a Navy P-3 and a Coast Guard helicopter, as well as Coast Guard and Naval personnel aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Seneca and the U.S.S. Boone, respectively. Each defendant faces a minimum mandatory sentence of ten years and a potential sentence of up to life imprisonment. Sentencing is scheduled for October 24, 2003.

The defendants were originally detained aboard a 43-foot speedboat, or go-fast, in the eastern Pacific Ocean on January 22, 2003. The go-fast was initially spotted

approximately 200 miles off the coast of Central America by a crew of Navy reservists in a P-3 aircraft, flying an anti-narcotics surveillance mission. After the P-3 crew observed what appeared to be bales of cocaine in the active wake of the go-fast, the crew contacted U.S. Coast Guard assets in the vicinity. Following a forty minute high-speed chase involving a U.S. Coastguard helicopter, the six men were taken into custody.

The case is part of an ongoing investigation, known as Operation Panama Express, in the Middle District of Florida by the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force. The participating agencies include the United States Navy, United States Coast Guard, Joint Interagency Task Force, Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, and the United States Marshals Service.